DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 206 601 SP 018 839

AUTHOR	Becker, Henry Jay; Epstein, Joyce L.
TITLE	Parent Involvement: Teacher Practices and Judgments.
INSTITUTION	Johns Hopkins Univ., Baltimore, Md. Center for Social Organization of Schools.
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, D.C.
REPORT NO	CSOS-R-305
PUB DATE	Feb 81
GRANT	NIE-G-80-0113
NOTE	48p.
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Educational Strategies; Elementary Education; *Home Study; Learning Activities; *Parent Participation; Parent Teacher Conferences; *Parent Teacher Cooperation; Reading Instruction; Role Models; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Effectiveness; *Teaching Methods; Tutoring
IDENTIFIERS	Maryland

ABSTRACT

A survey was taken to measure how 3700 elementary school teachers and 600 principals in Maryland school districts feel about parent involvement in home learning as a teaching strategy and to see how widespread this teaching strategy is. This summary of survey results provides information on the extent and use of varied techniques to involve parents in learning activities and introduces many of the issues regarding parent involvement in home learning activities. Survey results and discussion are presented on the following topics: (1) the feasibility of parent involvement; (2) techniques used to involve parents; (3) how involvement techniques are used by teachers; (4) attitudes of teachers and principals toward parent involvement; (5) debatable issues of parent involvement; (6) problems with parental assistance; and (7) information and questions on many aspects of parent involvement raised by the survey. Overall, the survey results indicate a very positive view and widespread use of several parent-oriented teaching strategies. (JD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Center for Social Organization of Schools

ED206601

Report No. 305
February 1981

PARENT INVOLVEMENT: TEACHER PRACTICES AND JUDGMENTS

Henry Jay Becker and Joyce L. Epstein

The Johns Hopkins University

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
J Hollifield
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

SP 018 139

STAFF

Edward L. McDill, Co-Director
James M. McPartland, Co-Director

Karl L. Alexander
Charles H. Beady
Henry J. Becker
Jomills H. Braddock, II
Ruth H. Carter
Martha A. Cook
Robert L. Crain
Doris R. Entwisle
Joyce L. Epstein
Gail M. Fennessey
James J. Fennessey
Homer D. C. Garcia
Denise C. Gottfredson
Gary D. Gottfredson
Linda S. Gottfredson
Stephen Hansell
Edward J. Harsch
John H. Hollifield
Barbara J. Hucksoll
Nancy L. Karweit
Hazel G. Kennedy
Marshall B. Leavey
Nancy A. Madden
David J. Mangefrida
Julia B. McClellan
Anne McLaren
Phillip R. Morgan
Robert G. Newby
Deborah K. Ogawa
James M. Richards, Jr.
Donald C. Rickert, Jr.
Laura Hersh Salganik
Robert E. Slavin
Gail E. Thomas
William T. Trent
Carol A. Weinreich

PARENT INVOLVEMENT:

TEACHER PRACTICES AND JUDGMENTS

Grant No. NIE-G-80-0113

Henry Jay Becker
Joyce L. Epstein

Report No. 305

February 1981

Published by the Center for Social Organization of Schools, supported in part as a research and development center by funds from the United States National Institute of Education, Department of Education. The opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the National Institute of Education, and no official endorsement by the Institute should be inferred.

Center for Social Organization of Schools
The Johns Hopkins University
3505 North Charles Street
Baltimore, MD 21218

Printed and assembled by the Centers for the Handicapped
Silver Spring, MD

Introductory Statement

The Center for Social Organization of Schools has two primary objectives: to develop a scientific knowledge of how schools affect their students, and to use this knowledge to develop better school practices and organization.

The Center works through five programs to achieve its objectives. The Studies in School Desegregation program applies the basic theories of social organization of schools to study the internal conditions of desegregated schools, the feasibility of alternative desegregation policies, and the interrelations of school desegregation with other equity issues such as housing and job desegregation. The School Organization program is currently concerned with authority-control structures, task structures, reward systems, and peer group processes in schools. It has produced a large-scale study of the effects of open schools, has developed Student Team Learning Instructional processes for teaching various subjects in elementary and secondary schools, and has produced a computerized system for school-wide attendance monitoring. The School Process and Career Development program is studying transitions from high school to post secondary institutions and the role of schooling in the development of career plans and the actualization of labor market outcomes. The Studies in Delinquency and School Environments program is examining the interaction of school environments, school experiences, and individual characteristics in relation to in-school and later-life delinquency.

The Center also supports a Fellowships in Education Research program that provides opportunities for talented young researchers to conduct and publish significant research, and to encourage the participation of women and minorities in research on education.

This report, prepared by the School Organization program, examines the extent to which teachers attempt to involve parents in learning activities at home and describes the variety of techniques used.

Abstract

This paper reports the results of a survey of about 3700 public elementary school teachers and principals in about 600 schools in 16 districts in Maryland. The survey requested information on what teachers think about parent involvement strategies and how they practice them. The main focus of the survey was on a set of 14 specific techniques that teachers may employ to encourage parents' participation in learning activities with their children.

Overall, the survey results indicate a very positive view of parent-oriented teaching strategies and widespread, although not intensive, use of the 14 teaching techniques. Comments from teachers illustrate the major themes for debate about the processes, problems and benefits of parent involvement programs.

Part I. Survey Results

INTRODUCTION

Teachers approach their instructional tasks with a variety of perspectives and strategies that emphasize certain aspects of teaching and deemphasize others. For example, some teachers teach language skills using organized games with the students, while other teachers teach the same skills by direct instruction. Teachers adopt different approaches to the same subject-matter partly because their teaching situations differ: for example, their students may have different learning problems or their classrooms may have different resources and facilities. Even in the same teaching situation, however, teachers may vary the approaches they take depending on the particular skills and talents they have for using various materials and forms of instruction, or the influences of their college training, supervisors or colleagues. In a given situation, which is the most effective teaching strategy? That is the most difficult question in the world of education and research.

One general approach that some teachers have found useful is to involve parents in learning activities with their children at home. This type of parent involvement is distinctly different from the parent involvement that brings parents into the classroom to assist the teacher or the parent involvement that includes parents as participants in decisions on school governance. Parent involvement in learning activities are strategies for increasing the educational effectiveness of the time that parents and children spend with one another at home.

As with most educational strategies, there are different opinions about the likely effectiveness of teacher efforts to get parents to be more active in learning-related activities at home. Some educators believe that widespread parent interest in the academic progress of their children constitutes an immensely underutilized teaching resource, requiring only general guidance and modest effort to bring results in many cases. Others, pointing out the major competing time commitments of parents and teachers and the highly variable instructional skills of parents, have suggested that all teaching of academic skills should be left to the teacher in the classroom. They suggest that little, if any, effort should be made by educators to influence parent-child interaction patterns at home.

There is very little information to support or refute either position. Research has not been conducted that systematically relates teachers' efforts to stimulate parent involvement in learning activities at home with the effects of this strategy on students and their families. Up to now, there has been very little research even to indicate how much teachers focus their activities in this direction.

In order to measure how elementary school teachers feel about parent involvement in home learning as a teaching strategy and to see how widespread this teaching strategy is, the Johns Hopkins Center for Social Organization of Schools conducted a formal survey of first, third, and fifth grade school teachers in most of the public schools in the state of Maryland in Spring, 1980. This survey is the first phase of a larger study that will give teachers information about the effects of these parent-involvement strategies on the teachers who use them and the parents and students who are affected by them.

This summary has been prepared for the teachers and principals who participated in the 1980 survey. It provides information on the extent of use of varied techniques to involve parents in learning activities at home. Additionally, the report serves as an introduction to many of the issues regarding parent involvement in home learning activities.

SURVEY RESPONDENTS

The survey's results express the teaching practices and professional attitudes of about 3700 public elementary school teachers in over 600 schools in sixteen of the twenty-four school districts in Maryland. In the fifteen districts that offered full cooperation with the project, the response rate was 73% of the teachers selected as participants in the study. In the remaining district, where access to the teachers was limited, the response rate was only 35%. The study also includes information from more than 600 elementary school principals in the state who responded to a brief questionnaire on parent involvement programs in the school.

Table 1 describes the characteristics of the 3698 teacher-respondents. About 28% of the survey respondents are first grade teachers; 30%, third grade; 29%, fifth grade; and 13% were either reading or math specialists, or others whom the principal designated as important contacts for a study of parent involvement (e.g., parent involvement coordinators).

About 90% of the sample of elementary teachers are female; of the male teachers, about 70% teach grade 5. About 20% of the sample is black, and over 60% of the black teachers are in the urban central city district. The teachers range in age from their early 20's to their 70's with most teachers (38%) in their 30's, born between 1940 and 1949. About half of the teachers have taught for more than 10 years, and of the rest, most have taught at least 5 years. Nearly half received graduate school degrees. Although a majority of teachers teach a single class of children both reading and mathematics, team teaching and departmentalization of instruction are common. For example, among fifth grade teachers, 75% report some form of non-traditional teaching arrangement.

Table 1

Characteristics of Teachers in Survey

(N = 3698)

Grade Level	% of Respondents
Grade 1	28%
Grade 3	30
Grade 5	29
Other reading, math, parent-involvement specialists	13
Sex	
Female	91%
Male	9
Race	
White	78%
Black	21
Other	1
Education	
Bachelor's	12%
BA or BA plus credits	40
Master's	26
Master's and credits or Doctorate	21
Experience	
1-5 years teaching	17%
6-10 years teaching	32
Over 10 years	51
Class Assignments	
Teach single class all day	55%
Teach several classes during day	45
Location of School District	
Rural/Small Town/Small City	32%
Suburban Ring of Metropolitan Area	49
Central City of Metropolitan Area	19
Students' Parents' Education (teachers' estimates)	
Majority did not complete high school	25%
Majority are high school, but not college graduates	52
Majority are college graduates	23

The responding teachers are representative of their profession in the state, and they reflect the broad range of geographic and socioeconomic variations in their student populations. The state's large metropolitan population and several smaller urban and rural areas are represented in the statistics in Table 1, as is the range of college-educated, high school-educated, and less-educated parent populations.

The questionnaire for teachers requested information on what teachers think about parent involvement strategies and how they practice them. The main focus of the survey was on a set of 14 specific techniques that teachers may employ to encourage parents' participation in learning activities with their children.

Overall, the survey results indicate a very positive view of parent-oriented teaching strategies and widespread, although not intensive use of these 14 teaching techniques. The next sections describe teachers' attitudes about parent involvement, their reported practices and some of the differences in opinions and practices among teachers who responded to the survey.

TRADITIONAL TEACHER-PARENT COMMUNICATIONS

Some forms of communication and contact between parents and teachers are nearly universal. Virtually all teachers (over 95% of the respondents) report that they talk with children's parents, send notices home, and interact with parents on open-visit school nights. About 90% of the teachers ask parents to check and sign students' homework. These standard parent-teacher communications occur because they have become accepted ways of bridging the information gap and the feelings of distance of teachers and parents who may be strangers to one another but who share common interests in the same children. Based on their questionnaire responses and the comments initiated on the survey form, teachers clearly support the use of these standard patterns of interaction with parents.

The survey shows, however, considerable variation in the ways teachers conduct standard meetings and in the topics teachers emphasize with parents. For example, 65% of the teachers report that they discuss "with each parent" what they can do at home with their youngsters; the other 35% discuss this topic "as the need arises," which may mean once, twice, or never. Slightly fewer teachers discuss with each parent how they teach reading and math in their classroom. However, many who discuss their own teaching methods do not talk about parents' responsibilities with homework, and many who discuss helping with homework do not discuss their own teaching methods

Nearly 80% of the teachers conduct more than three parent conferences in a school year. Over 50% report sending three or more memos to parents about their school program. But only 7% initiate

three or more group meetings or workshops for parents (apart from school-sponsored parents' nights). By far the major emphasis in these conferences, memos, and workshops is on the school curriculum. However, parent-based home activities are the second-most frequently mentioned focus, and are emphasized more often than "homework" or "discipline" among the teachers who use these forms of communication. Generally, teachers who conduct workshops for parents are the ones who most actively emphasize the teaching role of parents at home.

Principals of the schools in which teachers were surveyed reported near-universal support of traditional parent-teacher communications. About 95% of the principals report that they have a PTA or PTO and about half report an active Parents' Advisory Council associated with Title I or other programs. These standard organizations for parent participation usually have a core of active parents; about half of the principals report that more than 20 parents are actively involved in meetings and activities each month. Of course, even 20 parents active in developing school-wide and school-community activities is only a small fraction of the number of parents who may become involved in activities that concern their own children.

The principals, like the teachers, generally support the concept of parental involvement. Most of the principals have strong opinions in favor of parent volunteers in the classroom, and nearly three out of five report they have held staff meetings or workshops during the school-year that focused on methods for helping parents work with their children at home.

THE FEASIBILITY OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

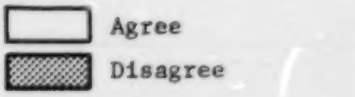
The teachers' responses to the questionnaire suggest that many teachers believe that parent involvement at home could be an important contributor towards achieving the goals they have set for themselves and for their students. At the same time, many teachers do not know how to initiate and accomplish the programs of parent involvement that would help them most. This dilemma is suggested by responses to six statements in the questionnaire about the value of parent-involvement strategies. Figure 1 contains the wording of these items and graphs of the teachers' responses.

On two of the six items, there was a good deal of agreement. Most teachers felt that parent involvement is an important ingredient in solving the problems faced by schools and that parent involvement in the classroom is useful for increasing parent involvement in learning assistance at home. On the other four items, the teachers were split close to "50-50." The differences of opinion were over whether teachers can actually influence parents to help their children at home; whether most parents have sufficient skills to teach their children to read or solve math problems; whether it is fair to ask parents to spend an hour each evening working with their children on school-related activities; and whether parents want to know more about the school curriculum than they are usually told.

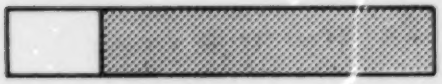
Figure 1: Opinions of Maryland Teachers about Parent Involvement

Can Parent Involvement Work?

Maryland elementary school teachers...

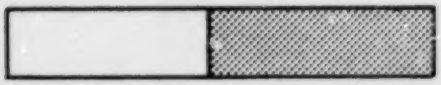


In this community, parent involvement is not an answer to the major problems of the schools -- the schools must solve their problems on their own.



Teachers can only provide parents with ideas about how to help with their children's schoolwork -- teachers cannot influence parents to use these ideas.

Most parents -- although they can teach their children to sew, use tools or play a sport -- do not have enough training to teach their children to read or to solve math problems.



Realistically, it is too much to ask parents to spend a full hour per day working with their children on basic skills or academic achievement.

If parents regularly spend time in the classroom, one result is that they usually make a greater effort to help their children at home.

Many parents want more information sent home about the curriculum than most teachers provide.

Thus, although almost three quarters of all teachers agreed that the general "idea" of parent involvement is a good one, about half of the teachers had serious doubts about the success of practical efforts to involve parents in learning activities at home. This should not come as a surprise. Teachers have not been educated in the management of parent involvement; the teachers' and parents' time is finite; the teachers and the parents have different skills and often different goals for the children; and teachers and parents may have many children (and other family obligations) that require a share of their time and interest. In spite of these real difficulties, some teachers have developed procedures that enable them to select and manage parental involvement programs.

14 TECHNIQUES TO INVOLVE PARENTS

Teachers were asked several questions about each of 14 specific teaching techniques that involve parents in learning activities at home with their children. These 14 techniques as well as others added by the teachers can be grouped into five categories:

1. Techniques that involve reading and books;
2. Techniques that encourage discussions between parent and child;
3. Techniques that specify certain informal activities at home to stimulate learning;
4. Contracts between teacher and parent that specify a particular role for parents in connection with their children's school lessons or activities;
5. Techniques that develop tutoring, helping, teaching or evaluation skills in parents.

The graphs in Figure 2 summarize how often the teachers in our survey use the 14 techniques grouped according to these five categories. Each section of the graph represents an increasing level of support for each technique. The sections from left to right in each graph indicate the proportion of teachers who:

(A) believe it would be unrealistic to expect sufficient and regular parent cooperation with this technique;

(B) believe that parents would cooperate, but would not have sufficient skills to use the technique effectively;

(C) believe that they could probably make use of the technique in their teaching situation but have not done so this year;

(D) have used the teaching technique a few times this year;

(E) have used the teaching technique many times this year;

(F) believe the technique is the single most useful parent-involvement technique that they have used.

Responses (A) and (B) indicate non-use of and no support for the technique; answers (C) and (D) indicate relatively passive or low support and use of the technique; and answers (E) and (F) indicate active support and use of the technique. In Figure 2, the larger the right-most sections of the bar graph, the more positive are the teachers' evaluations of the technique.

Techniques Involving Reading and Books

One of the most frequently mentioned home-learning activities for parents to conduct with preschool and elementary school children is reading. In educational journals, family magazines and even on bumper stickers, parents are asked to read aloud to their children and to listen to their children read aloud. Not surprisingly, the teachers in our survey reported that parent-child reading is their most used parent involvement technique. Two-thirds of the teachers said they frequently ask parents to read to their children or listen to the child read, and more than one-fifth named this activity as the most valuable parent involvement technique in their own teaching practice.

Parent involvement in reading activities is a more prevalent teaching practice among teachers of younger children. For example, our survey found that only one-third of the fifth-grade teachers make active use of this technique in their practice, while seven out of eight first-grade teachers do so. The decline in use of this technique may be because teachers of older students see less need for assigning read-aloud activities, or because they believe parents are less able to organize instruction for fifth graders whose skills can vary widely.

Teachers in the survey were asked about two other parent involvement techniques directly related to reading and written material: asking parents to take their child to the public library; and loaning books and teaching materials to the parent on a short-term basis. The majority of teachers believed these to be useful techniques that could be used with the families of their students. As a group the three techniques involving reading and books elicited more support from teachers than any of the other categories of parent involvement. Reading-related techniques have broad support across all teaching situations but are most often chosen as the most important method by first grade teachers (34%) and by teachers with a large proportion of children who have difficulty learning (31%).

Learning Through Discussion

Schooling is more than learning the mechanics of reading. Many teachers place importance on the development of students' abilities to express themselves orally. Even if families do not usually spend much time reading together, they can provide oppo ities for students to learn from conversations and discussi s.

The teachers in the survey were asked about three techniques that structure parent-child conversation in ways that might be educationally useful. One of these asks parents to view a particular television

Figure 2: Fourteen Techniques for Involving Parents in Teaching Activities at Home -- Evaluations by Maryland Teachers

Evaluation Categories:

- Unrealistic to expect parent cooperation
- Parents do not have sufficient skills

"no support"

- Workable, but did not use this year
- Used a few times this year

"passive support"

- Used MANY TIMES this year
- The MOST SATISFYING parent involvement technique

"active support"

ACTIVITIES EMPHASIZING READING

Ask parents to read to their child regularly or to listen to the child read aloud.

Loan books, workbooks, etc. to a parent to keep at home for short periods as extra learning material.

Ask parents to take their child to the library.

Figure 2 (cont.)

Evaluation Categories:

- Unrealistic to expect parent cooperation
- Parents do not have sufficient skills

"no support"

- Workable, but did not use this year
- Used a few times this year

"passive support"

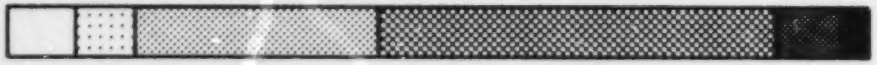
- Used MANY TIMES this year
- The MOST SATISFYING parent involvement technique

"active support"

LEARNING THROUGH DISCUSSION

Ask parents to get their child to talk about what he/she did that day in your classroom.

Give an assignment that requires the children to ask their parents questions - for example, that children write about their parent's experiences.



Ask parents (one or more) to watch a specific television program with their child and to discuss the show afterwards.

INFORMAL LEARNING ACTIVITIES AT HOME

17 Suggest ways for parents to incorporate their child into their own activities at home that would be educationally enriching.

Send home suggestions for game or group activities related to the child's schoolwork that can be played by parent and child.

Suggest how parents might use the home environment (materials and activities of daily life) to stimulate their child's interest in reading, math, etc.

Figure 2 (cont.)

Evaluation Categories:

- Unrealistic to expect parent cooperation
- Parents do not have sufficient skills

"no support"

- Workable, but did not use this year
- Used a few times this year

"passive support"

- Used MANY TIMES this year
- The MOST SATISFYING parent involvement technique

"active support"

CONTRACTS BETWEEN TEACHER AND PARENT

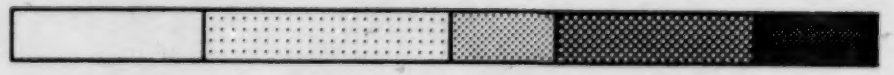
Establish a formal agreement where the parent supervises and assists the child in completing homework tasks.

Establish a formal agreement where the child provides rewards and/or penalties based on the child's school performance or behavior.

DEVELOPING TEACHING AND EVALUATION SKILLS IN PARENTS

Ask parents to come to observe the classroom (not to "help") for part of a day.

Explain to parents certain techniques for teaching, for making learning materials, or for planning lessons.



Give a questionnaire to parents so they can evaluate their child's progress, or provide some other "feedback" to you.

program with their child and to discuss the program afterwards. When this technique is employed, it may be a mild suggestion to students or parents or it may include a set of discussion questions prepared by the teacher for the parents prior to the evening of the telecast. To use this technique intensively, the teacher would have to have advanced access to or experience with the content of the TV program.

The systematic assignment of discussion about television programs was one of the least frequently used parent involvement techniques in the survey. About one-third of the teachers said that parents would not cooperate with a request to participate or that they would be unable to handle such discussions in ways that would be educational. Only about two percent of the teachers reported that they used this technique frequently. However, there was more "passive" support for this technique than for any other on the survey. Most teachers said that this was a way of involving parents that could work in their teaching practice, even though they had not used it.

Two other methods of involving parents in discussions are (1) family exchanges about daily school activities and (2) homework assignments that require children to interview parents to obtain biographical or other information. Parent-child discussions about school were frequently mentioned by teachers as a technique they request or require of parents, but student interviews of parents were infrequently assigned. Most teachers felt that students could profit from assignments that required them to ask parents questions, but only 15% made active use of the method. As expected, the older the child, the more likely the homework assignment to ask parents questions. There seems to be a large reservoir of "passive support" among teachers for this method of parent-involvement in school activities, just as for the use of discussions about television programs. It may be that the procedures to implement these techniques are not established well enough to permit wider adoption by teachers.

Informal Learning Activities at Home

The "parent-as-tutor" is one model of structuring parent-child teaching-learning activities at home. This model underlies efforts to have parents read to the child, supervise and review the child's homework or five practice tests or math drills using teacher-distributed flash-cards. The parents' role is to supplement the formal school curriculum to ensure greater mastery of basic skills by their child.

The "parent-as-role-model" is another way of structuring parent-child learning activities. This model is based on the idea that the parent is a natural teacher of varied skills and serves as a role model. The child may learn different skills at home from those taught in school and may imitate the parents or adopt the parents' values about what kinds of skills are important, interesting, or fun. A number of those who propose more intensive parent involvement in learning activities at home suggest parents can be most effective when they informally introduce their children to skills different from those

emphasized at school. The question is whether and how teachers can motivate parents who would not normally do so to take time to provide informal learning opportunities at home.

The teachers in the survey were asked about three techniques that involve parents and their children in informal educational activities; suggesting educationally enriching ways for parents to incorporate their child into their own activities at home; sending home suggestions for games or group activities related to the child's schoolwork that can be played by parent and child; and suggesting how parents might use the home environment (common materials and activities of daily life) to stimulate their child's interest in reading, math, and other subjects.

Each of these three items, as shown in Figure 2, elicited a similar pattern of responses from the teachers. About 30% of the teachers rejected these techniques either because of insufficient parent cooperation or because they felt the activities would be too difficult for parents to conduct. Another 40% supported the use of these methods in theory, but only infrequently used the techniques in their teaching practice. Finally, about 30% of the teachers actively supported and used these methods in their teaching practice. About 10% chose one of the three items in this category as the parent involvement method they found most useful and satisfactory.

Many of the parent involvement techniques presented to the teachers in our survey were employed as extensively by teachers just starting their careers as by teachers who had had many years of experience in the classroom. However, for all three techniques in this category--suggesting ways for parents to incorporate their child in their own activities, giving parents suggestions for educative games, and suggesting ways of using the home environment for learning purposes--teachers with more teaching experience used the methods more extensively.

For example, only 16% of the teachers in their first or second years of teaching said they frequently sent home ideas for parent-child learning games and activities. In comparison, about 25% of the teachers with more than 10 years of classroom experience said they did so. Eighteen percent of new teachers often suggested ways for parents to incorporate their child in their own activities, but 30% of the experienced teachers did so. It is interesting that many of the new teachers who used these activities reported these were the most satisfying parent-involvement techniques. These techniques tended to be preferred by reading and math specialists, teachers of low-achieving students, teachers of students from highly-educated families, and teachers in rural or small town areas.

Contracts between Teachers and Parents

The list of techniques presented to the teachers in the survey included two that involve the use of "contracts." This term implies a formal agreement to conduct and complete an activity or set of activities.

The two techniques are distinguished by the kinds of behavior requested of the parents. In one case, the parent is asked to provide or withhold privileges or punishments to the child based on school performance and behavior patterns that may be determined jointly by the parent, teacher and student. The parent does not engage in any direct instructional activity in this type of contract but assists the teacher in shaping productive school behavior.

The second "contract" technique requires parents to supervise or assist the students' homework or other projects. This may or may not involve some instruction or clarification by the parents but always involves the structuring of the home environment to support the students' school responsibilities. This kind of activity is often informally organized by teachers and parents, but we were interested in those instances where a formal contract for parental responsibilities was arranged by the teacher, parent, and child.

Teachers expressed less consensus about the value of both types of parent-teacher contracts than about most of the other parent involvement techniques. About 40% of the teachers felt that these techniques were not worth pursuing because they would not increase learning or because of insufficient parental cooperation or skills. On the other hand, 20% of the teachers felt that contracts for parental supervision of homework and projects were valuable enough to use "many times" during the year or were the most important parent involvement technique in their practice. Fewer teachers gave active support to formal contracts for parental rewards for school behavior, but of those who used the technique, many believed it was the most useful technique they employed.

There were some important differences in the use of contracts by teachers of students at different grade levels. In contrast to several parent involvement techniques supported mainly by teachers of the younger grades, contracts were used equally across the grades. They were preferred as the most valued technique by twice as many fifth-grade teachers as first-grade teachers. In part, this is because contracts offer the older students an opportunity for independent work as the students take the responsibility for conducting and completing contracted assignments on their own, after the teacher and parent are informed of the activity. Teachers used contracts with parents of students at all achievement levels, but were more apt to use them with students of better educated parents. Teachers in suburban districts used contracts more frequently, and less-experienced teachers were more likely than experienced teachers to classify contracts as their most useful parent involvement technique.

Helping Parents to Teach

The list of 14 parent involvement techniques contained three activities for parents that were methods for teachers to equip parents with observational and instructional skills: (1) instruction for parents in teaching and in making learning materials that could be used at home to supplement the teachers' work at school; (2) classroom observations to see how teaching proceeds in school and how the

children respond to particular lessons and methods of teaching; and (3) parent responses to teachers' questionnaires to evaluate their own child's progress or problems in school. The latter activity may assist the teacher more directly than it assists the parent. However, evaluation forms are often useful sensitizers, and, thus, may be useful to the parent in conducting activities at home with the child. Of these three activities, more teachers use classroom observation by parents than the other choices; very few of the teachers reported frequent use of evaluation forms from parents. Classroom observations and teaching parents about teaching and evaluation were encouraged by teachers of young children. Urban teachers and experienced teachers used these techniques more than teachers in suburban and rural areas and new teachers.

The Techniques Encouraged by Principals

It is important that the reports from principals show the same selective emphasis on reading as the reports from teachers. As Table 2 indicates, 76% of the principals say they have personally encouraged many teachers to adopt the teaching technique of asking parents to read to or listen to their children read. The principals placed least emphasis on the same two techniques given least practice by the teachers--parent-led discussion of educational TV shows and contracts with parents to systematically reward or punish student behaviors.

Although teachers and principals, as groups, seem to make similar judgments about the usefulness of different parent involvement techniques, direct influence from the principal to the teacher's practice is difficult to measure with the data available. Only one teacher in six ascribes the source of their most valuable parent involvement technique to be their "principal or other administrator." Teachers who actively use a particular parent technique are only slightly more likely than other teachers to have a principal who reports the encouragement of teachers to adopt that same technique.

HOW MUCH EMPHASIS ON THE 14 TECHNIQUES?

Most teachers are guided by a widespread understanding that parent involvement is a difficult proposition, and as a result make only tentative requests for such involvement. Regardless of which technique they use, only 9% of the teachers "require" parental cooperation; the rest "suggest" the technique. This means that the teachers' control over the technique and the response from parents is limited. Indeed, about 40% of the teachers report that none, fewer than half, or an unknown proportion of the parents carried out their requests to conduct certain activities. These conditions may explain why nearly 60% of the teachers say they can provide ideas for learning activities at home but they cannot influence the parents to use them.

Teachers estimated how many parents would attend meetings or workshops on learning activities at home. As the table below shows, only one-third

Table 2

Correspondence of Principals' Active Encouragement and Teachers' Active Use of Selected Techniques of Parent Involvement

	Percent of Principals Who Encourage	Percent of Teachers Use Actively
Read aloud or listen to reading	76%	66%
Informal games at home	45%	24%
Contract with parents on students' projects	33%	25%
Loan books to parents	31%	41%
Teach parents techniques for tutoring and evaluation	24%	21%
Parent contracts to reward or punish behavior	12%	13%
Parent-led discussion of TV shows	12%	2%

of the teachers believe they could attract a good number of parents to the meetings and only if they were conducted in the evening. Thus, it would require extra or voluntary effort by teachers for even a small percent of parents to become teaching partners through workshops conducted at school.

Estimated attendance by parents	Few or None	Many or Most
At morning meeting	87%	13%
At evening meeting	66%	34%

Teachers report having the most contact with parents of children with learning and discipline problems, and with parents who are already active in the school. For example, one-third as many contacts with parents are reported for "average" students as for students with problems. Most teachers report that they ask only some parents (not parents of all students in the class) to conduct particular learning activities at home.

Actions that are requested rather than required and carried out with little or unknown frequency; meetings attended by small groups of parents rather than all parents; and selected use of parent involvement techniques with only certain parents are all indications that, for the average teacher, parent involvement at home is not indispensable to a satisfactory performance of the teacher role. Few teachers appear to emphasize parent involvement to such an extent that they make it a major focus of their teaching practice.

As we continue this study in the next year, attention will be paid to mechanisms that increase the payoffs for teachers for effort put into obtaining more extensive involvement from parents.

DIFFERENCES IN TEACHERS' USES OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

This section describes some of the different patterns of use of parent involvement practices by the teachers in the survey. First, teachers' opinions and practices are reported for differing grade levels and for different educational levels of students' parents. Then, results are summarized on the pattern of home visits, use of parent involvement with different school subjects, and the relationship between parent involvement at home and parent assistance in the classroom. Finally, we look at the use of techniques by teachers in schools in which all teachers practice parent involvement and where few teachers do so.

Grade Level of Students

Most researchers who have studied parent involvement in learning activities, as well as those who have developed programs for parent involvement, have viewed the parents of pre-schoolers and early elementary-aged

children as their primary target. In the last 15 years, various "head-start" and "follow-through" programs systematically incorporated specific functions for parents as part of their organizational arrangements. Many of these programs were found to increase student learning of school-readiness skills more than programs used as alternate "control" treatments. Much of the emphasis on early childhood has been due to a belief that parents of young children are more willing and more able to perform useful functions in an educational program than are parents of older children. It may be, however, that procedures and tasks for useful parent participation for older children simply have not been worked out.

Figure 3 shows that for most of the 14 parent involvement techniques in our survey, teachers of younger students were more likely to use the technique. However, in only a few cases were the differences of large magnitude. Parent and child reading activities had the most pronounced decline with increasing grade level. The three "informal learning" activities included in the list also declined with increasing grade level, as did efforts to teach parents techniques for teaching their children. On the other hand, the use of contracts and assignments that required children to ask their parents questions, and the limited use of television-based family discussions and parent evaluation forms was as often used with older children as with younger. And, of course, some teachers at all grade levels used each of the techniques in the survey.

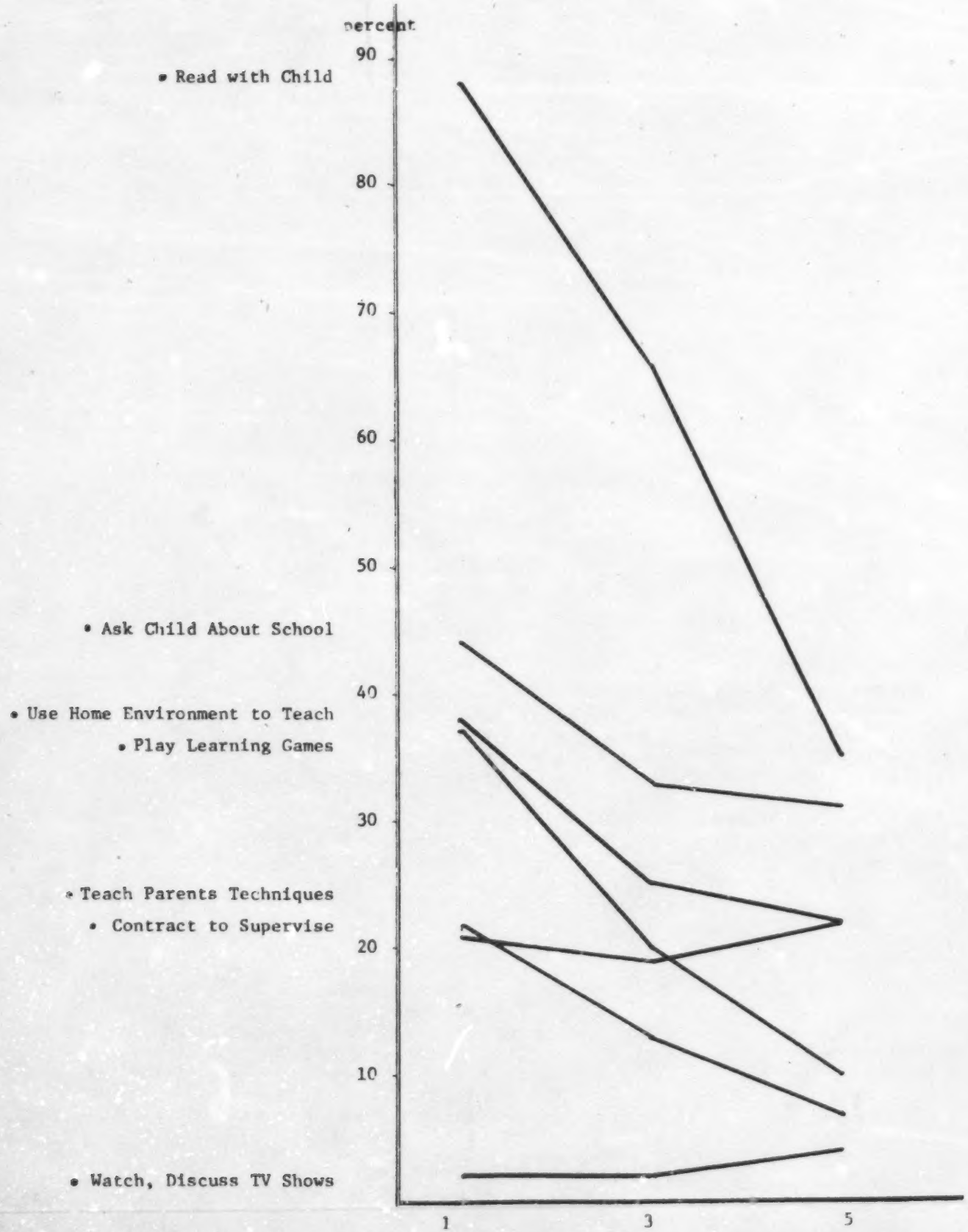
Educational Level of Parents

Many of the written comments of teachers tend to reinforce the common stereotypes about parents--"pushy" upper-middle class parents, "helpful" middle class parents, and "incapable" lower-class parents. However, the statistics on the techniques teachers use successfully with different groups of parents tell a different story.

Teachers who deal with college-educated parents, those who work with parents with average schooling, and those whose students' parents have very little schooling are about equally likely to be active users of parent involvement strategies. However, teachers who do not actively use parent involvement techniques respond differently to questions about the likely success of these techniques according to the educational levels of their students' parents. Teachers who are not active users and who teach children with better-educated parents report that the parent-involvement techniques would work but that they do not choose to use them. Teachers who are not active users and who teach children with less-educated parents are more apt to report that the parents would not be able or willing to carry out activities at home related to the child's schoolwork.

Figure 4 illustrates the differences in the pattern of use of several of the techniques with parents of different educational levels. For each technique, bar graphs are shown for three groups of teachers--those whose students' parents were mainly college graduates; those whose students' parents were mainly high school graduates, and those whose students' parents nearly all lacked a high school diploma. Each bar

Figure 3: Active Use of Parent Involvement Techniques by Grade Level



graph shows the proportion of teachers who made active use of the technique, the proportion who believed it could wor but were not frequent users, and the proportion who did not feel that their students' parents could or would participate effectively.

To summarize Figure 4, let us consider two examples. Parent-involvement techniques that involve parent and child reading activities are used by a majority of teachers with students from all educational backgrounds (see upper-right panel of Figure 4). At every parent educational level, about 60% of the teachers made active use of this techique. However, of the remaining teachers, those whose students' parents had little education were more apt to attribute their lack of use to a lack of parental cooperation or skills, whereas those whose students' parents had more education claimed the technique could work but that it was not currently part of their teaching practice. Thus, whether parents with little schooling are viewed by the teacher as "capable" of assisting their children in reading at home may depend on whether the teacher has worked out the kind of procedures and communication patterns that would enable parents with little schooling to assist.

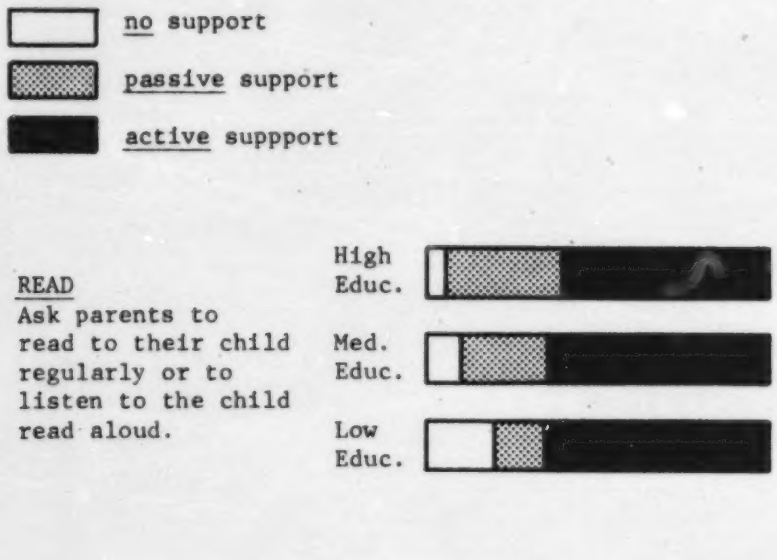
With parent involvement techniques that involve discussion, active users are even somewhat more successful with parents who had less schooling than with parents having more schooling. (See the middle-right panel of Figure 4). However, teachers who were not active users differed in the opposite way according to their students' family social class. Those who reported that their students' parents had little schooling said that using discussions could not work, while those whose students had better-educated parents said the techniques could work but that they were not being used.

The pattern for the other techniques in Figure 4 (and the others not shown there) is fairly uniform. It seems clear that some teachers of less educated families have developed techniques that enable the parents to participate in the schooling of their children and to successfully cooperate with the school. The important questions are: How do they do this? Are the teachers' techniques generalizable so that other teachers with similar populations can use them? Do the efforts of the teachers and the parents have any payoff for the students, the teachers, or the parents? These are the kinds of questions that will be studied in the next phase of this research.

Home Visits

Most contacts between teachers and parents are in the form of notes and memos transmitted by the child. Yet personal contacts between parent and teacher may be vitally important to develop the commitment of parents to participate in a program of learning reinforcement at home. Teachers make personal contact most often by brief conversations before and after school, by parent conferences on "parent night" or by special appointment, and by telephone conversations with parents.

Figure 4: Levels of Support for Some Techniques by Estimated Education of Parents


Evaluation categories:
no support
passive support
active suppport
PLAY
Send home suggestions for game or group activities related to the child's schoolwork that can be played by parent and child.
High Educ.
Med. Educ.
Low Educ.
READ
Ask parents to read to their child regularly or to listen to the child read aloud.
High Educ.
Med. Educ.
Low Educ.
CONTRACT
Establish a formal agreement where the parent provides rewards and/or penalties based on the child's school performance or behavior.
High Educ.
Med. Educ.
Low Educ.
DISCUSS
Ask parents to get their child to talk about what he/she did that day in your classroom.
High Educ.
Med. Educ.
Low Educ.
INSTRUCT
Explain to parents certain techniques for teaching, for making learning materials, or for planning lessons.
High Educ.
Med. Educ.
Low Educ.
EVALUATE
Give a questionnaire to parents so they can evaluate their child's progress, or provide some other feedback to you.
High Educ.
Med. Educ.
Low Educ.

One infrequently used method for developing personal relationships is home visits by the teacher. Fewer than one-quarter of the teachers in the survey indicated that they had made any home visits during the school year, and only 2% said they had visited more than a handful of children's homes. The teachers who visited children's homes were more likely to be favorable towards parent involvement techniques. In particular, they were most likely to be active users of techniques that emphasized oral exchanges between parent and child--having parents discuss TV programs, having parents ask children about school, and having children ask parents questions about themselves. Also, teachers who visited several homes made more use of parent evaluations and parent classroom observation methods than did other teachers.

School Subjects for Parent-Involvement at Home

Teachers reported the academic subject in which they used their favorite parent involvement technique. Their responses are indicative of the popularity of reading as an activity parents can conduct successfully. Over four-fifths of the teachers listed one or more reading-related subject as the focus of their most successful technique for parent involvement. In contrast, only 20% of the teachers place their priority on parent involvement in science activities. Especially in the early elementary grades, teachers ask parents to supplement the teachers' emphasis on basic skills rather than enrich or extend students' experiences with other subjects such as arts, sciences, or home and hobby skills.

Parents in School

Some teachers report having a plethora of parents who are active at school and willing volunteers in their classrooms. Others report almost no parent activity in the school building and no use of classroom volunteers. About half the teachers have at least some parent assistance in the classroom, ranging from a few days per month to every day. Most parents selected to assist in the classroom are selectively recruited, although some teachers send out general requests for parental help.

Most teachers (84%) agree that if parents spend time at school "they usually make a greater effort to help their children learn at home." Observing a teacher's techniques for presenting material, handling questions, and analyzing mistakes may help parents to be more effective in conducting school-related learning activities at home. This helps to explain why teachers invite parents to observe their classes. If watching the class can aid the parent at home, it is a rather effortless way for teachers to help parents to assist in learning activities at home.

Not surprisingly, teachers who report more parent involvement in the school also are more favorable to using techniques that involve parents in learning activities at home. Support for each one of the 14 parent

techniques was correlated with the proportion of parents who are active at school and the frequency with which the teacher made use of parent volunteers in the classroom. The teachers who reported the most active parents in the school and in the classroom were especially supportive of the techniques that use informal activities at home and that teach parents tutoring and evaluation skills. For example, of the teachers who often suggested how parents might use materials and activities at home to stimulate their child's interest in school subjects, about 60% had parent help in the classroom--mostly on a weekly basis. Of those who "passively" supported this technique, less than 50% had parent classroom volunteers. And only 30% of the teachers who were pessimistic about this kind of at-home parent activity had parents help during the school day.

School Support for Parent Involvement

Do teachers develop attitudes about parental involvement and related teaching practices as a consequence of their observations of and conversations with other teachers at the same school? This question is of interest because it is useful to know whether a "group effort" across an entire school is necessary for successful parent-involvement programs, or whether individual teachers develop personal programs regardless of the activities of other teachers in their school.

For all types of parent involvement techniques except the activities about reading and books, there was a small but positive association between an individual teacher's support for a technique and a measure of overall parent-involvement orientation for all teachers in the school. It appears that some teachers are encouraged to use some techniques when their school climate supports parent involvement, but there are many examples of individual successes without support from other teachers in the school.

PREVIEW: PHASE 2 OF STUDY OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

We have documented teachers' reports of different practices in parent involvement across the state of Maryland. What do the differences mean in terms of student learning, the quality of education for students, and the quality of the school environment for teachers and for parents? It may be that parent involvement helps to improve student learning and improves the process by which teachers and parents provide education. It may also be that other teaching strategies are as or more effective and efficient. Although proponents and opponents of parent involvement in learning activities have their opinions about the answers to these questions, the facts are not known.

In the second phase of this study we will collect more detailed information from a small sample of teachers who participated in the survey. We need to know why teachers use particular techniques, how they implement them, and why they reject other techniques. Information of this sort will enable more teachers to make reasoned choices and decisions about implementation, adoption or adaptations of techniques for particular settings and students.

Part II. Teachers' Comments: Debatable Issues of Parent Involvement

The written comments by more than a thousand of the teachers responding to the survey reflect many years of experience with parent involvement. This section presents selected comments that illustrate several major themes discussed by the teachers. Each theme can be viewed from two sides of the parent involvement story--there are possibilities and there are problems with parent involvement. A dialogue is developed by contrasting comments and opinions of the teachers on the benefits expected from parent assistance at home; and on the organizational structures used to conduct parent involvement activities. Some teachers are very positive about parent involvement; others have been burned in their attempts to communicate and work with parents.

Teachers' Time

Many teachers commented on the amount of time needed to prepare projects, workshops, and/or directions for parents to use and supervise at home. The debate across comments hinges on whether the time required by the teacher is worth the trouble, and whether teachers should volunteer their time without knowing the likely effects of their efforts. Some teachers telephone parents frequently to give positive messages about the child's progress in school or special skills or abilities observed as well as to discuss problems. If a teacher telephones 30 parents and talks for 10 minutes to each, the teacher spends 5 hours voluntarily on the telephone with parents. The teacher may do this in addition to preparing lessons, grading papers, preparing report cards, working with parents and preparing parent-involvement activities. How much time can teachers give to parent-related activities? How often? To what effect? These are not trivial questions.

Several teachers offered positive statements that indicate that the job of teaching cannot be accomplished without programs that involve parents. For example:

> "I really rely on parent help. Long ago I realized that only with parent help can my job be performed adequately."

Other comments indicated that the time needed to develop learning activities for parents to use at home or parent assistance in schools is just not available to teachers or not worth the trouble:

> "You completely omitted from your questionnaire any items regarding the additional time and effort required of the busy teacher in parent involvement activity."

> "I believe both parents and students can benefit from parent involvement. However, I also know that it takes a great deal of training and explaining and coordinating to have a good program. I've spent many hours doing just this. Frankly, I no longer feel like giving the many hours of extra time required to do this. We are not provided with time to do this type of training. It's all our own time. I no longer feel like giving my time without compensation."

Parents' Time

Several teachers acknowledged that parents' time at home is limited by the responsibilities of children, spouse, and/or other family members, cooking and chores, and a general need for relaxation. The debate across comments concerned whether parents should be asked to spend at least a short time with each child on academic activities, whether parents' time at home should be spent developing nonacademic skills and responsibilities, or whether teachers have any justification in requesting or requiring parent assistance in academic or social development.

Some teachers suggested that short periods of time on learning activities at home would maximize the benefits from the limited time that is available:

> "Because so many parents are concerned about keeping body and soul together (out of necessity), they have so little "prime" time to spend with their child or children. It is essential that we give these people some very practical and meaningful tips on how to spend quality time with their children."

> "In my memo to parents I ask them to spend just 10 minutes a night going over the child's work cards. This way neither the child nor the parent feels overworked."

> "I have also experienced that parents are more than willing to help children in assignments that are short, reinforcement type work, that show the child and therefore the parent to be successful. Parents love to hear their children read."

Others stressed that the "learning activities at home" should not be on school lessons, but on general socialization and development.

> "I find it far more profitable for the child to get "home training" at home, since today's children do not seem to display the sense of responsibility

needed to do their best...If they learn self-reliance, responsibility, and develop a good self-concept within the family, the carry-over brings improved academics. Then there would be less need for parental involvement in teaching the academics."

"I feel it is my job to teach and that parents may become impatient and frustrated when working on skills at home. Some reinforcement at home is quite helpful as long as it is kept to a minimum amount of time yet done consistently. An hour a day is unrealistic, and unfair to parent and child. I feel that children spend a large part of their day in school (hopefully learning) and at home need to be released for relaxation, play, and pursuing interests (hopefully, not all television). Parenting is in itself a demanding job..."

Students' Time

Many teachers focused their comments on the benefits or problems for the students of parent involvement in learning activities at home. Some believed academic activities should be kept to a minimum so children could follow other interests in their out-of-school time. Many stressed with deep conviction that students' time at home should be mainly the time to play, enter activities of special interest or relax. Others expressed concern that academic tasks at home can cause parents and children psychological stress as the child's pressure to perform vies with the child's need for help and parents' desire to help. Others believe the child's time at home should reflect parents' teaching of home-related skills and responsibilities.

Several teachers expressed concern that the complex relationships between parents and children can be affected by the kinds of activities assigned for work at home by teachers:

"Most parents are very willing to assist at home and welcome ideas, but I stress working for short periods of time and only when both parties are not becoming upset. Some parents tell me they want to help, but they lost their patience. On the other hand, children often feel embarrassed when they don't think they are performing as well as they want to for their parents."

"Care must be taken in "home help" situations so that pressure on the child is not increased by emotional or unenlightened parental involvement when the goal is to help the child and thereby lighten pressure placed upon him."

Another debate hinges on whether to try to maximize the potential advantages for some children even if other children may not be assisted. The

differences of opinion are between teachers who believe parent activities are valuable for whoever completes them and teachers who believe no parent-conducted learning activities should be assigned by teachers unless all parents agree to cooperate. They charge that children of parents who don't do their part are put at a disadvantage through no fault of their own:

> "Although many of my students come from homes where support of schools is great, there is also a good number of students that come from homes where support is minimal and parent involvement is very low. This makes it difficult to give the class an assignment involving parents when only some of them have parents that would bother (to help)."

> "Most parents talk a good story, but rarely follow through on any involvement. Then there are some who given prodding, guidance, and a great deal of specific directions on what to do, will try, consistently, to help their child, and it pays off, even if the results are minimal. But it is for these few that it is worth doing what we can to get them involved--because it's ultimately for the children."

This is an important and often repeated theme on which there are legitimate differences of opinion. Should the parents and students' time at home be spent on lessons and school assignments, or should the time be spend on new experiences and diverse skills that build upon parents' special abilities? The consensus, of course, may be different for children of different ages and with different learning problems.

Expected Benefits

In spite of some real problems, many teachers described benefits they perceived or expected for their students and for the parents from parental involvement. There are few rewards, other than internal ones, to encourage a teacher to spend time to work toward the potential benefits of parent involvement. Some teachers remarked about the lack of support from their principal or other teachers. Others recounted the psychological dangers that prevent teachers from trying some activities, or from trying more than once. Nevertheless, many teachers described positive results from their efforts: Better basic skills, greater retention over summer because of work on skills conducted at home during the vacation; better behavior of students in class; greater number and variety of classroom materials developed by parents at home; enrichment in areas the teacher could not direct; improved parental self-image because of successful cooperation with the school.

Some of the benefits perceived by teachers included:

"Although my teaching career is near a close, I believe parent involvement is one of the keys to improving education, and it should be encouraged. It will not only achieve better pupil performance, but it will improve the self-image of each parent, especially in a school community (Title I) such as ours."

"I welcome the parents' help and their expertise that increase my children's understanding in special enrichment areas in which I may not be well-versed. For the most part, any assignment I send home is pursued and completed with parents' help."

"I feel a good parent education group or program is needed to help parents enjoy and understand their children's need to try, fail, and try again on their own. Parents can guide and show their love by being there when their children need them, but not by doing the work for their children."

Subgroup Differences

Some specified that benefits from parent involvement should be expected only for some children. They described some groups of parents they believed were less likely to be able to conduct learning activities successfully at home. The interesting thing is that other teachers pointedly commented that these same groups were successfully involved in parent involvement activities. The debate across comments centered on whether benefits from parent-involvement could be expected from parents of older students, parents with little education, working parents, and one-parent households.

For example, some teachers believe the benefits will depend on the family structure and the other activities of the parents. Compare these comments about the involvement of working mothers:

"I feel my experience as a working mother and as a single parent, has helped tremendously in gearing my relationships and assignments involving parents."

"More and more of my 'parents' are single parents and sole support. Their time and energy is limited. They do want to cooperate for the most part but are too tired and overworked. I don't even help my own children very much, I am too tired when I get home."

"Mother's employment--this factor has nothing to do with parental involvement. You did not ask if parents were alcoholic, drug-addicts, child abusers, etc.--You did not ask if parents I work with (and for) are interested in school, impressed with my credentials, comfortable with the administrators and me. These are important facts--mother's employment activities are not."

> "Working parents have more demands on their time. Helping kids at home becomes a more frustrating task when a parent is tired or has many jobs to do. Also some parents get carried away and ask the kids to do too much at home."

Other teachers commented on differences between parents with greater or lesser education themselves.

> "I don't feel the educational level of the parents plays too great a part since in my experience I've had tremendous parent involvement with those whose educational level did not go beyond the 8th grade."

> "Parent involvement became extremely poor as the years progressed. When the emphasis of education went back to basics, the parents withdrew which could be attributed to their own poor educational background and preparedness to help their children."

In general, the benefits from parent involvement are still unknown. Most teachers would say, "It depends." It depends on the students and their parents, as this teacher comments:

> "I have had excellent cooperation from parents this year. In many instances it has been up to 95%. Other years have not produced the same results. Last year, I had cooperation with approximately 10 out of 32 parents, and it was the same school. It depends on the group of children--if I had had to complete this questionnaire last year my responses would have been totally different."

And, "it depends" on the school climate and the principal's support, as this teacher notes:

> "Most of my teaching career, my principals have been very much against the teacher working with parents other than when discipline was involved and have been unwilling for the teacher to have contact with parents outside of regular classroom hours. My breakthrough in working with parents has been due to working with an outstanding teacher who is excellent in home and school relations."

Use of Parent Involvement Coordinators

An interesting set of comments were offered by teachers on the Title I programs for parent involvement. These programs often include Parent Coordinators whose job it is to get more parents involved in more

aspects of school life. The Title I programs are the largest formally organized program for parent involvement. Several teachers remarked on the benefits from excellent Title I parent programs and just as many said the programs were poor and wasteful. The contrasting opinions suggest that some organizational strategies are necessary if the programs are to succeed from the teachers' point of view.

> "I teach in a Title I school where we have an organized Parent Involvement Program headed by two Parent Involvement Aides. They lead many programs and activities once conducted by the teacher, such as home visits, telephone calls, trips with child to dentist or doctor, assistance with clothing needs, recruiting parent volunteers operating the Reading Club...organize Parent Workshops for parents to learn home games using their environment, etc. So many of these opportunities are out of the hands of the classroom teacher as it once was--25-30 years ago when I taught in a rural Appalachian consolidated school. I had much more parent involvement then from my teaching point of view than I do now, and definitely had more support from parents on things I attempted to do. Although our Title I aides have very good rapport with our parents there seems to be more of a trend to let them do things for the parents and less helping parents to help themselves. We do have "star" examples of parent volunteers of more than 10 years who now are "super" paid Title I aides. That is progress, as they help not only their own families but others."

> "Under the Title I program, we have a home visitation aide who takes learning games into homes of our Title I students. Parents are to play these with the students. Of my eight Title I students, only two parents agreed to accept the games and neither of the two children involved ever played any of the games. I consider this a total waste of our federal money."

> "Many Title I programs mandate parental involvement. I've been active in helping develop and conduct parent-involvement workshops. I often have classroom workshops to bring parents up to date on curriculum and let them know that they are their child's primary and most important teacher."

> "I have found that since the school I have worked in became Title I there is less parent involvement. The conclusion that I came to was that since there are paid assistants, parents feel that their services are not needed."

> "Parent volunteers require constant professional supervision and coordination. This is not done by a Title I Parent Coordinator with a high school education.
>
> "Our Title I parent coordinator has been my greatest influence in working with parents."

The reactions partly reflect the teachers' personal attitudes and partly reflect the fact that some Title I programs are better organized, staffed by more qualified coordinators, and communicate better with teachers to aid the classroom programs. How do the successful Title I programs operate to strengthen family and school ties? What strategies from successful Title I programs can be incorporated into any school to improve home-school alliances? It is expected that the second phase of this study will contribute answers to these questions.

Problems with Parental Assistance

Many teachers who have had experience working with parents have some concerns about the likely success of parent involvement practices. Some teachers described problems often associated with volunteers--undependability, shortened schedules, short commitment, different goals and values of volunteers and the schools. Others were concerned about the parents' lack of training in methods and approaches to teach children with problems. These problems are related to the teachers' lack of time to provide an adequate quick-course in how to teach or how to deal with children's learning problems. This is especially true for parent volunteers in the classroom, but parents at home are also "volunteers." They are not accountable to the teacher, and some teachers commented on how parents fail to follow through in learning activities at home.

Some teachers were concerned about the students' development of responsibility in cases in which, in class or at home, parents assume too much of the responsibility for students' assignments.

> "...the more opportunities we give our parents to be in the school and the more information given out by teachers, the more parents tend to take any work that is given to the child, as <u>their</u> work rather than developing responsibility in their children."

Other teachers expressed concern that parents have many problems, other than academic ones, that they need help with. These problems and inabilities interfere with any teachers' requests for assistance with learning activities at home.

> "Some parents do not know how to, or will not, control their children. They expect teachers to work miracles and get their children to learn <u>and</u> behave when they cannot make their children behave. When con-

tacting parents, especially for behavior problems, I hear more frequently I don't know what to do with them. No teacher can teach if time must be spent on simple discipline and manners that should be learned at home. I believe that it would help many parents to see their child work with others in the classroom."

"I have found as a teacher in this transient communit the parents are too busy to bother about how their children are doing. If everything is going smoothly they stay at home. Only if trouble arises does one hear from a parent. Even if you are doing a fantastic, outstanding job you do not hear from parents. Only in time of trouble."

"Parent involvement is the problem. I have accomplished the impossible when I manage to just get some parents into the school for a conference."

"The effectiveness of using these techniques depends on the community(ies) the school is serving. I have taught in a school where the parents were so involved, one did not need to use techniques. I have taught in a school where only a few (very few) parents were capable of using any technique no matter how simple. I have also had a parent who could have helped her son, tell me that that is my job."

Some admitted that teachers fear parents, and that this inhibits the program they will attempt.

"Most teachers fear parents and I, too, only use parents when I feel I have complete control."

"My experience indicates that teachers are even more fearful than the parents at our interaction. Essential for a good community parent aid program is a top-notch Parent Coordinator."

Successful Efforts

In spite of all the possible problems, some teachers with parents of all educational levels and students at all achievement levels have been able to establish programs that emphasize the link between school and home for students' academic progress. The techniques are described in Part I of this report.

Reading with children. Many teachers described how they organize a formal program in which parents or students read on a regular basis. One example:

> "About four years ago in a school with a large minority population, most parents were contacted and agreed to see to it that their children read--either to the parent or by himself for 10 minutes an evening. Many parents cooperated and I believe it helped. Of course, the children could read longer if they wished. They brought in slips signed by their parents each morning and were rewarded occasionally by small items donated by local businesses. Very few parents objected."

Signing papers and folders. Many teachers have devised different systems to keep parents aware of the children's school work. In part this benefits the teachers because they feel they have kept parents informed of successes and problems before report card grades are issued. Some teachers try to do more than inform by attaching skill-building assignments or games based on the individual students' problems identified in school work or on tests:

> "By having parents sign children's graded math tests and units, I cover several problem spots: Parents always have a good idea of grade average; parents can see child's progress or lack of it; signing the math units enables parents to see all their children's daily assignments before they are disposed of without the hassle of seeing it every night. Units get signed when the test is taken; and poor grades have a sheet I attach telling the parents to study the needed skills with their child. The signing insures the parent sees the note."

> "I send a letter to parents each time we start a new phase of work, explaining what we will be doing and how they can help. This is signed and returned. I also send all returnable work home on blue or green paper or attached to a blue or green computer card. Parents and kids know blue papers are to be returned. I have about 95% response."

Some use a system that permits the parents to communicate back to them with more than a signature:

> "A buddy-book: Each day I write a comment concerning the child's work and general behavior in a book devoted just to homework and teacher-parent comments. The parent signs and responds."

Others have devised phone conference systems to talk with working parents, evening and Saturday conferences and workshops, and other means for two-way communications with parents.

Preparation of materials. Teachers described two ways in which parent-made materials are used for learning activities.

Materials made in school are used at home...

> "I give parents materials to make flashcards just like mine in math or reading for use at home. Also, parents have watched "mini" lessons on skills that they could teach at home."

> "I also like the mini-clinic: Parents of four kindergarten and seven first grade children were encouraged to participate. Parents alternated monthly for individual or small group meetings to discuss activities and games they can use to reinforce skills being taught. We sent home materials to be used for a month and returned at the next meeting. Children having the most difficulty learning were selected. Of the 11 invited, 9 are participating. One grandmother and two fathers also attended. Personal contact has made a difference. The success of our parent involvement programs appears to be closely related to teacher commitment."

And materials made at home are used at school...

> "In my 'Read Along with the Family' program I send home books and a tape recorder for grandparents or parents to tape the child's favorite story or book. They can listen to it in class. I prepare an activity sheet to go with the tape."

Home visits. Some use home visits to lay the groundwork for communication with parents that will occur throughout the year. Home visits are arranged voluntarily on weekends or before the beginning of the school year by the teacher and parents, or are formally organized by school procedures. Some schools give teachers release time while substitute teachers cover their classes; other schools establish half-days for children so that the teachers' visits occur on the afternoons when no school is scheduled; other schools allocate two full days for teachers' visits when there is no school scheduled.

> "Our most effective technique occurs in the first week of school when the first graders attend 1/2 day. We make a 20 minute visit to each home, explain the program and needed supplies, hear concerns, etc. I feel I gain six weeks of knowledge about the child during that visit. Also, I feel good in being able to greet each parent by name (usually!) the next time we meet."

> "I visited each child's home before school opened in the fall. I took each child's picture, chatted about the things he or she liked to do, pets, etc. On the first day of school the pictures and the stories of each child were on the bulletin board. The visit also gave me an opportunity to talk with the mother, often with both parents, about curriculum, plans for

homework, etc. I expect to resume these visits next summer because they are so useful. There are no tearful children the first week. I know the children by name before they come into the classroom. It is very easy to recruit parent volunteers. It forms the basis for continuing parent contact throughout the year--because we know each other, telephone conversations when a child is absent or seems troubled strengthen our relationship. It seem to me that education must be a partnership between parent and teacher."

Summer learning at home. Summer activities for parents to maintain skills from the school year may be an especially important area for home-school programs. Several teachers commented on the work they arranged for parents to supervise during the summer, such as:

"I sent home at the end of the year a calendar of summer activities that would involve parent-child participation and would help the child improve or retain basic skills."

Dilemmas of Parent Involvement

The teachers were aware of the dilemmas of home-school relationships:

"Parents are so involved with staying alive and being able to keep up economically, there is little or no energy left to devote to children--much less spend time teaching, disciplining, etc. The time they have is spent being loving, lenient and feeling guilty for not having time or energy to help their children. Children have no motivation to study--they're too busy raising little ones, cleaning house and doing adult work at home because the parents are out trying to make ends meet. It amazes me that the children can run houses, raise siblings and still find time to learn at all."

"Many homes have no literature in them--everything comes from TV--yet the schools neglect the media. Parents want to be supportive and help, but they can't--yet without their support, schools cannot make any real difference."

"If parents became actively involved and worked with the teachers, our students would be more successful. Our students need lots of motivation that teachers alone cannot provide."

In some ways, all of the comments cause heads to nod in general agreement. The grains of truth are the fruits of teachers' real experiences, and there is no denying the different reactions of teachers to the parents with whom they have worked. There were honest differences in teachers' opinions: (1) Parents care but can't do much to help the school or their children in actual learning; (2) Parents care but shouldn't help with school learning; (3) Parents care and can be of great help if they are shown how to help. There was no disagreement, however, about the fact that parent involvement requires the teachers' commitment and the parents' commitment to be successful. For both parents and teachers there are no quick, tangible rewards for their time and effort other than perceptions of a child's progress and an occasional pat on the back from one another.

Many comments stressed the parents' and students' needs for time at home that is free of academic demands; an equal number emphasized the fact that many students who have trouble in school would be assisted with some structured daily work at home. Parental assistance with extra time for learning may be one of the few strings that remains to pull a student up to grade level. Many teachers believe it is worth a try to develop programs for parents to conduct at home that will supplement the teachers' efforts.

The question is not, Which teachers are right in their reactions to parents? Because of an absence of objective evidence, it is impossible to assure teachers that parent involvement will lead to improved student skills or improved parent-child exchanges. It is equally impossible to assure teachers that they can be more successful if they ignore parent involvement, leave it to chance or leave it to the initiative of some parent volunteers.

The teachers' comments suggest several questions that should be addressed:

How can parents' and children's time at home be guided by the expertise of the teacher so that individualized skills can be coordinated into the parent and child's activities at home?

Can parents be held accountable for the activities they agree to conduct so there is some way to control and reward the child's progress?

How can the expertise of each parent be captured so that parent-designed experiences can be coordinated into the teachers' programs at school?

Can time at home be divided so that teachers' and parents' common interests are coordinated to the child's advantage?

How have teachers solved the real problems of parent involvement, and with what effects?

How can the solutions be organized so that some teachers' art of establishing and maintaining successful home-school alliances can be generalized for other teachers who would like to try successful techniques?

The differences in teachers' opinions and the lack of objective information on the topics debated show how research can contribute to this important aspect of education. A small sample of teachers who participated in the survey will be selected to continue consulting with the project staff about parent involvement. Readers with particular interest in this topic who, by chance, are not contacted are welcome to write to the project team to provide details of especially well-developed parent involvement projects or to add suggestions of school or classroom structural changes that are needed in order to make parent-involvement a viable alternative for more teachers.

Part III. A Postscript

Both the statistical results from the survey and the important written contributions of the teachers provide information and raise questions on many aspects of parent involvement:

1. Of all types of "parent involvement," supervision of learning activities at home may be the most educationally significant form of parent participation. To begin with, in contrast with PTA councils and classroom volunteers that involve relatively few parents, parent activities at home can involve many or all children's parents.

2. Some parents work with their children at home with or without teachers' suggestions. The focus of most parent involvement efforts by teachers is to involve those parents who normally would not know what to do to assist their children with learning activities at home.

3. The attitudes, training and experiences of the individual teachers have a lot to do with whether they choose to develop parent involvement programs. However, the attitudes of parents and principals, the needs of the students, and the assistance the teachers receive from their colleagues at school also contribute to the likelihood and the success of teachers' efforts to develop parent-involvement programs.

4. The role of the parent in learning activities at home is not well defined, and the benefits or disadvantages from different parental activities and approaches are not known. For example, the parent may be cast as tutor, teacher's monitor, listener, task initiator, reactor, or co-learner in activities conducted at home. Which roles are most effective for what kinds of situations?

5. Differences in opinions about parent-involvement techniques may depend on the skills needed by students of different abilities within the classroom. Skill building and drill for remediation or enrichment require different kinds of learning materials and make different demands on the teachers' and parents' time and energies. Skill building requires different designs and techniques for students two years behind grade level and students on or above grade level. How can parent involvement programs take into account the special needs of each student, so that time at home

can build upon the individual attention at home to assist each student's learning?

6. The teacher's role is changed when the teacher acts as a manager of parent involvement. The teacher shares a portion of the teaching authority when parents are given materials and instructions for supervising learning activities at home. Parents at home are a corps of volunteers who are not clearly accountable to the teacher for their successes or failures. New behaviors are required when teachers coordinate activities with the parents; and different reactions to students are required from teachers after parental activities have occurred at home. What are the changes in the teacher's role that occur under different parent-involvement techniques?

7. Teachers intrude on the family schedule and activities whenever homework is given. The older the student, the more homework, the greater the intrusion on family time. If parental time and effort is required by an assignment, it is possible that even more intrusion will be experienced. However, if homework is accepted as an important mechanism for reinforcing classroom instruction, then homework assignments that involve parents may maximize the learning that occurs during the homework period, and more than compensate for the greater intrusion. It is not inevitable that carefully constructed assignments will be experienced negatively by the parents. These assignments can be as simple as a weekly spelling drill or as complex as daily lessons in a language or math curriculum. We need to know how parent involvement can be organized for teachers, parents, and students so the responsibilities of each are clear and the goals are attained.

8. One of the reasons so many teachers and principals conduct and support open school nights and parents' conferences is that these activities have become formal, accepted strategies for parent-teacher exchanges. They are "school-level" activities, that recur in similar, predictable form across the school years, In contrast the techniques of parent involvement in learning activities at home are classroom-level projects that are developed by individual teachers. The parents' and teachers' expectations may not be clear because the patterns of exchange for these activities have not been standardized. It is questionable whether the familiar rituals of open school night and parent conferences accomplish more than a polite exchange between parents and teachers. Techniques for parent involvement in home learning activities have greater potential for actively involving parents in important exchanges with the teacher that may assist their chilren's progress in school. We need to know how teachers can organize parent involvement so the activities will become as familiar as the standard parent-teacher events, and so the interactions of parents and teachers can occur with ease.

The search for significant and accurate generalizations about the optimum use of parent involvement teaching strategies continues in the hope that educational practice will be improved by these research efforts.